



King's Research Portal

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Brown, K. (2018). The Communist Party and Ideology. In M. Frazier, & W. Wu (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Contemporary China* (1st ed., pp. 287-301). Sage Publications.

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

The Communist Party of China and Ideology

Kerry Brown, King's College, London

Ideology seems to figure as something that belongs more to the past than the present when we talk of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the second decade of the 21st century. The Party's sixth decade in power, the consensus at least amongst historians inside and outside the People's Republic (PRC) is that post 1949 history divides into two broad phases – the Maoist era before 1978, and then the reform and opening up era afterwards. Marxism Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought dominated the early era, and ideology then mattered. Belief in it was often a case of life or death. Party and non-Party members had savage fights with each other over ideological matters, ranging from the function of the Party itself to the role of politics in everyday life and the nature of leadership. After 1978, pragmatism became the order of the day. 'It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice' was the phrase attributed to Deng Xiaoping to encapsulate this.¹ The hunt for ideological purity had cost the Party dear in the past. From 1978, practice was the sole criterion for truth, not pre-determined ideals on which the world was due to be shaped. There would be seeking truth from facts, and the implementation of the four modernizations, with a focus on making China rich, strong and powerful. Where ideology was helpful, it would be subscribed to. But where it got in the way, it could be forgotten. That at least is one reading of the general role of ideology in the two phases of CPC history after 1949.

This is, inevitably, a great simplification however. Ideology still mattered after 1978, and still figures in China today. The clue is in penetrating remarks that Wang Hui, an influential academic, made when he talked of how policy changes have come about in the PRC. Since 1949, he wrote, "every great political battle was inextricably linked to serious theoretical considerations and policy debate".² This has not changed. Ideology matters enough for leaders from Jiang Zemin, to Hu Jintao, and now Xi Jinping to consider it important enough to have their chief ideological contributions written into the State Constitution. Jiang's 'Three Represents' (三个代表) cleared the way in the late 1990s to allow non-state entrepreneurs into the Party as members in 2001. Hu's 'Scientific Development' (科学发展) was meant to square the circle between the market and state planning from the mid 2000s. Xi Jinping's leadership sponsored the major announcement at the Third Plenum in 2013 of making the market not just preferable but necessary for reform. All of these involved changes in ideological position. If the PRC

¹ The attribution of this phrase to Deng is worth a study in its own right, so intimately has it been linked to the policy and ideological position of China since 1978. It was originally a saying from his native Sichuan. It also long predated 1978 even in Deng's own use of it. Nor is it strictly an accurate report of what he actually said. According to the biography of him by Alexander V Pantsov and Steven Levine, 'At the end of June 1962, at a session of the Secretariat examining a report on rural work by the East China Bureau, Deng also openly said, 'In the districts where the life of the peasant is difficult, we can use various methods. The comrades from Anhui said, 'It doesn't matter if the cat is black or yellow, as long as it can catch mice it is a good cat.' These words make good sense.' In , Alexander V Pantsov and Steven I Levine, *Deng Xiaoping: A Revolutionary Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

² Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity*, London: Verso Books, 2010, p 6

is a non-ideological zone, it is strange therefore that so much attention and effort is given to articulations that look ideological. It is even stranger that so much time for cadres is spent on ideological training, with a network of some 2000 party schools at national and local level.³ Why all this effort and all these resources for something that doesn't really matter?

Perhaps this misunderstanding by outsiders about the continuing importance of ideology in modern Chinese politics arises from the fact that while it is ruled by a political movement which has the name 'Communist' in its title, the country is clearly marked by inequality as extreme as in societies and economies marked as capitalist, and contains a vibrant entrepreneurial business class and a free market. This gives rise to the assumption that, if it has an ideological basis at all to its political elite, it is one that largely apes or follows western models, particularly those in the US or Europe. An article in 1999 from the Cato Institute typifies this: 'Communism is dead in the hearts and minds of its people,' it states, 'the Chinese people prefer market riches to Marxist dogma.'⁴ This sort of approach creates the idea that the party is simply involved in the pretence of believing anything remotely Marxist. The flattering conclusion is that the western political ethos has prevailed in all but name. Accepting that means being resigned to bafflement by the huge effort, and the very strange language, in which ideas continue to be conveyed by political leaders to the public in China referred to in the preceding paragraph. It means attempting to understand Chinese politics under the premiss that its leaders never really mean what they say when they talk about fundamental ideas like the mass line, creating the primary stage of socialism, or developing the market with Chinese socialist characteristics. The maintenance of this sort of discourse after it has reportedly lost its true meaning is deeply mysterious. Why bother doing it?

If the Party is as pragmatic as is often claimed, then surely the most pragmatic thing it could do is jettison these out-moded ideas and their associated language forms, and simply rebrand itself as social democratic. Clearly the Communist Party has no intention of doing this, at least not at the moment. It continues to invest immense energy and time in ideological formulations which can be broadly described as Marxist or Communist. Those who seek to understand the reality of contemporary China have to have a way of understanding why this is the case, and what the Party's attitude towards the function of ideology is, especially when it is under so much pressure from the complex reality of the country it is trying to govern around it. One of the other claims made over the last decade is that the Communist Party does have an ideology, but it is more based on an appeal to visceral nationalism and ideas of Chinese greatness and exceptionalism – Marxism with *Chinese* characteristics, the market according to *Chinese* conditions, etc. It is true that nationalism matters to contemporary Chinese leaders, who appeal to it as a basis for legitimacy. But to go further and claim that it is the sole basis of their ideology is too extreme, as will be argued later in this essay.

If we define ideology as the attempt to set out a consistent, broad set of beliefs, practices and their related codes, with intimate links between these and the exercise of power and its associated language forms, then it would be strange if Chinese contemporary leaders were not interested in such an obvious

³ See Frank Pieke, *The Good Communist*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p 1-3

⁴ James A Dorn, "The Death of Communism in China", Cato Institute, March 5th 1999, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/death-communism-china>

source of legitimisation and influence. Ideas matter anywhere, even if they are very simple (perhaps sometimes particularly if they are simple and accessible). The context for ideology and its form in the modern, interlinked, globalized, and networked world might have changed, but not the importance of ideology itself. And while there are many qualifications and restrictions around the proposition that the CPC still adheres to socialism, and practices Marxism Leninism, elements of these do figure in its much more hybrid ideological position now. In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars like A. Doak Barnett and Schumann could point to a highly circumscribed, and linguistically heavily marked core area, policed by relatively easy to define Party institutions and actors, and talk of this being the zone of ideology.⁵ But today, the terrain has changed. Ideology does not matter to the vast mass of Chinese people, any more than thinking hard about the difference between left or right wing philosophical principles and their underlying assumptions matters much to audiences in Europe, America or other multi party democratic countries. For the CPC elite, however, ideology is significant. It matters that they accord it a place in their public utterances, and they look at least like they believe in it and are trying to conduct their political lives according to it. It also matters that their ideological position is seen as being coherent with other leaders around them. For all the associated problems about whether they believe in it sincerely, and fully subscribe to it, in fact that is not the real point. They have to sound like they believe in it; there is little incentive for them to change this unless they have a solid political reason. Ideology remains a tool for them, and one they often use. It is not a matter of the interiority of their statements of ideological beliefs and standpoints – that is inaccessible to us, just like the most profound personal beliefs of many western politicians. What we can see is the surface importance. And as I will demonstrate below, plenty of effort goes in there to showing that ideology matters.⁶

The Producers and Vehicles of Ideology

For all its abstract quality, ideology is the product of particular mandated institutions within the contemporary CPC. There are predominantly within the Party apparatus. They can be categorised as follows:

- The Propaganda Department of the Central Committee
- The Leading Group on Propaganda
- The Central Party School and its associated networks of schools across the country
- Departments, sections and schools specialising in ideology in government supported think tanks, from the Chinese Academy of Social Science Marxism Leninism department, to local variants
- Media such as the People's Daily, or the Guanming Daily, which often make contributions to ideological discussion through editorials and publications.
- The Office of Spiritual Civilisation under the State Council

⁵ A. Doak Barnett, *Cadres, Bureaucracy, and Political Power in Communist China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967 and Franz Schumann, *Ideology and Organisation in Communist China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966.

⁶ For a discussion of what ideology actually is, see Kerry Brown, 'The Communist Party of China and Ideology', *China: An International Journal*, Volume 10, Number 2, August 2012, PP 52-68

In addition, there are dissemination channels and methods for ideology, ideological training and ideological messages:

- Periodicals like the 'Seeking Truth' (求实) magazine (previously the 'Red Flag' periodical).
- Important leadership speeches which are then published, broadcast, or otherwise disseminated.
- Articles in state media, particularly those mentioned above
- Training for cadres at Party schools and other entities in ideology
- Party branch meeting discussion and ideological study sessions
- Study of ideology at school and university for all students; this forms a fundamental part of the curriculum.⁷

These are the issuers of ideology and the structures through which ideology is formulated, discussed and proposed. The entities above have partially a guardianship role – they are in the business of defending set lines of orthodoxy and discrediting or attacking those who seek to challenge or undermine these. An example is the issuance of attacks on western universalism, western constitutionalism, and other associated 'bad thinking' which followed the publication of the Document Number Nine in early 2014 mandating university teachers in their classes not to propagate these negative thoughts.⁸ Further in the past, various entities were involved in the attacks on spiritual civilisation in the 1980s, when the first wave of economic reform brought about demands amongst some sections of the population for concomitant political reform. The CPC throughout its history, at least at the elite leadership level, has maintained a high awareness of there being enemies in the wider world, and of the need to delineate clear lines between friendly and hostile positions. This is maintained to this day.

Within these organisations, however, there have always been individuals who are significant, and play a major role in the formulation of ideology. In the era of Mao Zedong, it was his assistant Chen Boda who played a key role in formulating his ideas and contributing to the writing of his speeches, or their cleaning up after they had first been issued. Other figures in the state messaging sector were also key – Hu Qiaomu was amongst the most influential, an editor on the People's Daily who was masterful in his ability to reduce complex issues to a slogan or sentence. Maoism was largely conducted through such lapidary slogans, allowing the main rungs of action to be set out clearly just on the basis of clear, concise four, or eight, character edicts.⁹

⁷ Anne-Marie Brady undertakes a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between media and the Party in *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

⁸ See 'Document 9: A Chinafile Translation' at <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>, accessed 29th November 2015

⁹ On insights into Hu Qiaomu in action, see Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things With Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies*; Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992. For the adaptations made to the Chinese language for political reasons, see Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013

There was always space for contention in the formulation of ideology. In the Maoist era, the parameters of ideological orthodoxy were set so wide, and were often so contradictory, that as long as people appealed to Mao as the authority of their actions and utterances, then it was often difficult to attack on the grounds of precision or fidelity to any particularly rational body of beliefs. More often than not it simply saw one form of fanatical and emotional fervour pitted against another, through violence, intemperate language and attack. But after 1978, real, clear policy options appeared, and real choices were being made about, for instance, how open China should be to foreign capital, how much it should embrace marketisation within its economy, and how much space should be granted to the private sector. These were all heretical ideas in the period of Mao, and their appearance needed some kind of consensus in the Party, and above all some credible ideological justification which did not wholly seem to jettison and discredit what had come before in Communist development in China. Deng Xiaoping, the key sponsoring elite leader over this era was famously uninterested in book learning, and it was unclear if he had read much of Marx or any of the canonical texts of Marxism.¹⁰ Deng's mantra of 'making practice the sole criterion of truth' sounded non-ideological, but in fact at heart it carried profoundly ideological importance, at least for the Party. It involved recalibrations of the role of material reality within thinking, the acceptance of a pragmatic and empirical approach to the assessment of the material world, and the opening up of new spaces by which to understand the operations of the economy.

Deng's ideas were opposed, most significantly by figures like Chen Yun, who asked for more restrictions to be set on the market space being opened up, and, in a more radical way, by Deng Liqun, who adopted a position characterised as broadly leftist. His critique of new reforms throughout the 1980s and 1990s were around the ways in which the creation of a Chinese market and non-state sector created inequity and inequality. And while being critical of some of the policy mistakes and mismanagement of Mao as a figure, Deng Liqun maintained great faith in Mao Zedong thought.¹¹ The 1989 uprising and the fall of the Soviet Union initially posed an existential threat to the Party's core beliefs, but by the mid 1990s through a combination of repression, pragmatic change (more reform to prompt more growth) the Party had accepted that its core ideological position was in essence a hybrid one. 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' was written into the State Constitution, allowing for tactical changes in the generic ideology of Marx and Lenin in order to accord with China's 'national characteristics.'

In the last two decades, the principle figures in ideology have all been significant political figures. Zeng Qinghong was Jiang Zemin's key advisor, while Hu Jintao relied heavily on the subsequently disgraced Ling Jihua. Throughout this period, Wang Huning remained a constant, one of the most influential yet

¹⁰ In his *Selected Works*, Deng stated that 'weighty tomes are for a small number of specialists. It was from the *Communist Manifesto* and *The ABC to Communism* that I learned the rudiments of Marxism... Marxism is not abstruse. It is a plain thing, a very plain truth.' Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works, Volume 2*, Excerpts from talks given in Wucheng, Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Shanghai, 18 January to 21 February 1992, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1994. The same, according to a new study of Mao by Andrew Walder, could be said of Mao, whose main research into Marx had also been through the *Communist Manifesto*, published in the late 19th century in China and one of the few widely available classical Marxist texts. See Andrew Walder, *China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, p 71

¹¹ On Deng Liqun, see Kerry Brown and Simone van Neuenhuizen, *Mao and the New Maoists*, London: Zed Books, forthcoming.

low profile figures in the party apparatus, whose role in the Central Committee Office meant he had huge access to elite leaders and took a key role in formulating policy, and then translating it into clear messages. Wang played a role with Jiang's 'Three Represents' which allowed non state sector business people to become Party members in 2002, and in the 'scientific development' and 'harmonious society' campaigns of the 2000s. He remains influential as a full Politburo member since 2012. Beside him, figures like Li Jinru of the Central Party School also carried weight, involved in the writing of speeches and maintaining some sort of rhetorical fidelity to the main orthodox memes of Marxism Leninism with Chinese Characteristics.

Chaos Theory

The issue in the second decade of the 21st century is not that China is a place with no ideology. On the contrary, it is perhaps better understood as a place with too much. Every time a speech is made in (modern) China by a major central leader, they much acknowledge the importance of Marxism Leninism, and of Mao Zedong Thought, then move on to state belief in Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thinking of Jiang Zemin, and finally say some quick words about 'scientific development'. With Xi Jinping, the newest concept is 'China Dream'. Once all these are recognised the speaker can finally try to say something new. But by that time, they have probably already lost the interest of their audience.

Each generation of Chinese leadership have left a residue on the thinking of the party and the language by which it expresses this. Logically, as time goes on, so the list of acknowledged positions lengthens. The net result is increasing confusion, and the creation of a self-created 'market' of different positions. The CPC is therefore guided now by an ideological world view which is best described as hybrid, and almost embracing of contradiction. The key contradictions are:

- A simultaneous stress on its international roots in Marxism, but also its deeply indigenous nature – it is a universal system but applied to the unique characteristics of China. This contradictoriness has always existed since the earliest era of Mao when he challenged Marxist orthodoxy because of the lack of a proletariat in China and stressed that in fact the revolution would be run from rural areas and guided by farmers so that it more suited conditions in China.
- The constant tension between the Chinese government's increasing embrace of markets, capital and entrepreneurship, but its rhetorical commitment to public ownership, equity and socialist values prioritising the state above the private sector
- The lack of clear division between Party and state roles. Ideology is Party ideology, and defines a zone for the state. But all state agents act within the parameters of ideology, setting out policy and then implementing it that has to accord to these. This often leads to conflict, particularly between upper and lower levels of governance. Ideology from the centre is often extremely abstract, and interpretation of it involves immense contention.
- The position of the Communist Party in the 21st century trying to overcome the very clear divisions between pre and post 1978 ideology. Broadly, up to 1978 Maoism embraced class struggle as the key means of reforming society (putting politics in command), and undertook a series of increasingly dramatic and all encompassing campaigns through which to forge social

change, the most epic of which was the Cultural Revolution from 1966. Since 1978, the onus has been on a wholly different set of ideas, many of them directly contrary to those of classical Maoism. Leaders like Xi Jinping, the current general secretary of the CPC have attempted to bridge this gap by talking of the key link between the two eras – that the first built the foundations for the second, and without it, the second would not have come about. In this interpretation, the common area has been the ambition to build a rich, strong China, - in essence, an ideology of nationalism. The question however is the kind of China that both eras were trying to build – a Maoist China with vast communes, and a wholly state directed economy is a wholly different prospect to what Yasheng Huang has called ‘capitalism with Chinese characteristics.’

- The relationship between the CPC’s ideological position now and Chinese culture and history as opposed to that of its revolutionary phase. Under Mao, campaigns to smash the ‘four olds’ led to a ‘criticise Confucius, criticise Lin Biao’ movement in the early 1970s. These figured Chinese cultures and traditions as enemies of modernity, inimical to contrasting a progressive society, forms of thought which embraced hierarchy and conservatism. Under the post-reform leadership, however, the ways in which supposedly traditional Chinese culture have offered themselves as a new basis for legitimacy has become increasingly strong. Confucius has made a spectacular comeback, with institutes now criss crossed across the world bearing his name; Chinese culture figured in the 2008 opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in the absence of any reference to Mao; traditional Chinese culture is regarded as a foundation stone for Communist Party moral thinking (Hu Jintao’s ‘harmonious society’), and with the idea of ‘taking people as the key thing. These attempts often seem like they are trying to square a circle, and appear opportunistic.
- The division between rhetoric and practice: the Party in its ideology celebrates equality, equity, justice and harmony. In practice, it is often willing to allow inequality in economic development (ostensibly as a means to an end – allowing some to grow rich and others to follow them), injustice in society is so great there were, according to Yu Jianrong of the Chinese Academic of Social Sciences over 200 thousand ‘mass incidents’ in 2009 alone; and the Party continues to deploy violence against those it figures as its key enemies.

In the 1980s, there was talk of a ‘crisis of faith.’¹² Since that time, the Party has increasingly used its success in the economic realm to justify its ideological position. This has been characterised as highly pragmatic. Like a comment the British historian A J P Taylor used about himself, the Party has strong convictions held weakly. It will tolerate experimentation, and if it allows more growth and material success, then this is translated into ideological justification. The creation of town and village enterprises in the 1980s as reforms in the agricultural sector took effect, liberating many from work on production to move into other sectors, is one such case – a grassroots event which then was so successful it was acknowledged in central ideology.

¹² See Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition*, Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2008

For all its pragmatism, however, the Party has what now appears to be a highly complex, hybrid and sometimes contradictory ideological position. With so many changes, why therefore continue to strive for a synthetic, holistic position? Why not just allow that there is a spectrum of ideas in Chinese society, and that the Party in its attempts to embrace all these ideas is trying to be all things to all people, and failing to make much sense to anyone?

Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping

One of the striking characteristics of the Xi era has been the return of a stress on ideology, albeit an even more hybrid form. Xi has been loosely described as Maoist – and yet in 2013 he added a personal statement to the Third Plenum decision that year stressing the importance of the market, and demanding that more be done to liberalise the state owned sector by allowing more hybrid ownership models – something that would have been anathema in the Mao era. Non state companies continue to be very important in the Xi leadership thinking, along with attempts to reach out to the emerging urban middle class who are so important as a source of growth in the future as China changes its fundamental economic model towards a more service orientated one. The Xi leadership a year later announced at the Fourth Party Plenum the importance of rule by law, and of the need to have more predictable forms of regulation and their associated accountability in society. Despite this, the Xi era so far (to late 2015) appears one increasingly antipathetic to rights lawyers (it detained almost 250 briefly in mid 2015), has seen a clampdown on journalists, and the expressing of an overarching narrative of hardcore intolerance to discussion of political reforms that involve considering multi party democracies, bicameral systems of governments, and what is grandly termed ‘western universalism.’ New regulations proposed in 2015 inhibit and define more narrowly the role of foreign civil society groups in China. Xi’s China is a place that looks more, not less, ideological than that of Hu.

Some have interpreted this as a sign of vulnerability.¹³ Others see it simply as evidence that broadly the Party feels it has got things right since the 1990s and that this has emboldened it to take a harder line.¹⁴ Xi has himself been described as a strongman, and his speeches have been littered with language about the need for a strong, rejuvenated, powerful China, the need to remain faithful to the ideological contributions of Mao Zedong and former leaders, and the need to tap into the great, glorious cultural and historic traditions that China has had over what is claimed are ‘five thousand years of continuous civilisation.’ Xi is perhaps the most perplexing mix of pragmatic and hard-line ideological that Chinese leadership has ever seen.

We should not overestimate his powers in this area. In some ways, the most that can be said is that he has successfully (at least so far) read the ‘mood’ of the current elite leadership, many of whom felt that the Hu Jintao era was successful in powering out GDP growth but did very little else, and that the Party was facing a moral and belief crisis. The Anti Corruption struggle since 2013 figures as a moral as much

¹³ An example of this is David Shambaugh, ‘The Coming Chinese Crack Up’, in the Wall Street Journal, March 6th 2015, at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coming-chinese-crack-up-1425659198>, accessed 29th November 2015

¹⁴ An appreciative description of the meritocratic system in China is to be found in Daniel A. Bell, *China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015

as a power purge by the Party of its own membership above all – people who have been stealing state assets for their own networks and not contributing to the prosperity and stable rule of the Party. There is also a stronger sense in the Xi leadership of historic mission – the desire to achieve the two centennial goals, the first in 2021 when the Party celebrates a hundred years in existence and tries to create ‘middle income status’ in China, and the second in 2049 when the People’s Republic marks its hundredth anniversary and ‘democracy with Chinese characteristics’ is achieved. The powerful emotions that completing these achievements involves have garnered Xi’s leadership public support, aided by a strong sense that the collapse of the Soviet Union Communist Party over two decades before shows the perils of abandoning ideological struggle.

Liu Yunshan

Xi has around him a group of advisors, like any political leader. But the most significant in terms of ideological enforcement is Liu Yunshan. Liu has sat on the Standing Committee since the 2012 leadership transition at the 18th party congress ~~then~~. He is unique amongst the current seven strong group in having had no provincial party or government leadership experience. He was a journalist in the state run Xinhua news agency in Inner Mongolia in the 1970s and 1980s, and then, under the patronage of a protégé of the key ideological enforcer at the time, Ding Guan’gen, taken to Beijing in the early 1990s. When there he proceeded to work his way up the state propaganda structure, becoming the head of the Propaganda Committee of the Party in 2007, and then in 2012 the overall ideological lead.¹⁵

As a journalist, Liu was regarded as relatively open minded. But in his current position, he is seen as conservative, and relatively ‘red’ (the metaphor for leftism in China). Under this leadership, China has jailed more journalists than any other country in the world, and seen a series of campaigns against forces regarded as inimical to the Party, from campaigning journalists, some of whom were jailed after the Shanghai Stock Exchange collapsed in July 2015 for ‘rumour mongering’, to news cover-ups (like the disastrous management of the Wenzhou fast train crash that resulted in multiple casualties in 2011).

Liu and Xi, at least from their words in public, agree on one common principle; that control of the messenger means control of the message. Liu has been in overall charge of the attempts to sanitise the internet, blocking foreign websites like Facebook and Google, and ensuring that illegal and unwholesome content (in the Party’s eyes) is quickly removed. Like Xi, Liu sees the power of the Internet, and the real advantages it brings in terms of connectivity and networking. But he has a high sense of awareness of its potential dangers, and the ways in which it can give voice and space to negative forces. Echoing the ancient legalist philosopher Han Fei from the Qin dynasty over two and a half millennium before, the party propaganda apparatus under Liu has waged an increasingly intense war against the ‘three evils’ (terrorism, separatism and religious extremism).¹⁶

¹⁵ For details of Liu’s career, see Kerry Brown, *The New Emperors: Power and the Princelings in China*, London and New York: I B Tauris, 2014.

¹⁶ Han Fei referred in his great classic treatise to the ‘Five Vermin’ – mostly obnoxious people. See Han Feizi, ‘Basic Writings’, Translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press: New York, 2003, pp 97-113

Control of the central apparatus of ideological dissemination is part of the current strategy. But the more important element is to unify the message, so that at least it has some coherence. As the key person responsible for ideology, therefore, not only through his Politburo position, but through presidency of the Central Party School in Beijing, perhaps the most important think tank for the Party, what do Liu's words say about how the Party sees itself and the world around it, and what its fundamental beliefs now are?

Speaking to a closed session of foreign scholars in Denmark in the summer of 2014, Liu presented a simple overview of what he called the 'five dimensions in understanding the Communist Party of China.' These in essence give a rubric by which to understand how elite Chinese leaders in the second decade of the twenty first century see the role of themselves and the party they represent in the world. Liu states categorically that 'to study China, one must study the CPC.' And 'to study socialism with Chinese characteristics one must also study the CPC.' It is a fundamentally ideologically entity. It has a belief system. And this has five core pillars:¹⁷

- History: The past century , through humiliation and foreign aggression, saw China try many different forms of governance, from constitutional monarchy, to imperial rule, to republican systems. But none of these worked. Only, Liu states, has Communist with Chinese characteristics really succeeded. The implication of this is very obvious: 'The leadership and governing position of the CPC is not self-appointed, but rather chosen by history.' The CPC is therefore the servant of destiny.
- People: The CPC is supported by 'the overwhelming majority of the people.' It does not represent vested interest, or narrow networks, but the greater good for the greatest number of people. 'If the people are happy with things, we will get down to [doing them]. Liu quotes the Pew research centre surveys that show 85 per cent of Chinese are content with the direction of their country. This is a register of satisfaction, and is used by Liu as a basis for showing that, despite having no open elections, the Party still has a popular mandate.
- Culture: As stated above, the recent leaders of China have been zealous in locating sources of legitimacy in China's past and its cultural assets. 'One can find reference to the values and governing philosophy of the CPC in traditional Chinese culture,' Liu states, referring to ancient philosophical concepts of benevolence, justice and integrity and saying these are consistent with the core values of socialism. Moreover, the CPC 'promotes the integration of Marxist thought with traditional Chinese culture.' In a reappearance of the strong exceptionalist strand of Chinese elite discourse about the Party, he states that the CPC is able to combine 'socialist values with the unique values of China.'
- Practice: The Party is pragmatic, it judges its ideas according to their concrete impact on the real world, not because of their abstract neatness. For this, the Party must be organisationally coherent, it must have strong principles of Party building, an idea of the mass line and close

¹⁷ Liu Yunshan, 'Five Dimensions in Understanding the Communist Party of China', Speech at the International Seminar of the CPC in the Eyes of European Scholars', June 11th 2014, record of speech given in Copenhagen, unpublished.

adherence to it in order to serve the people, and a strong sense of its own cultural and moral values.

- The World: Despite the stress on exceptionalism, Liu makes clear that the CPC 'always puts a high premium on adopting a global perspective and world wide vision.' The CPC is intrinsically international, maintaining relations with over 600 other political parties outside of China, and 'learning from the outside.' Deng Xiaoping once stated that as a communist he was optimistic. This is something that becomes apparent in Liu's final comment. He states that the CPC is 'future orientated.'

How does ideology figure in this articulation of a CPC leader's statement of the Party's current world view? Firstly, the Party is pragmatic, unifying, diverse, and hybrid. It is exceptional to China, but highly interlinked to the outside world and aware that China's problems all have an international dimension. The pragmatism of the Party means it constantly has tactical space to change its direction, move into different areas, one minute claiming uniqueness, the next unity with the outside world. Liu states that 'political structures are so plural that there is no unified standard to justify all political parties.' This heads off demands by those ideologically trying to promote the creation of multi-party democratic systems in China.

There are some other characteristics of the CPC's ideological position. It promotes the ideas of scientific solutions to problems, and the creation of a very set sense of modernity, involving the deployment of science in fulfilling people's material needs, giving them 'clothes to wear and food to eat and delivering the kind of standard of living that they now see prevailing in the US, EU and other developed countries.' But it also tries to link with the concept of an ancient cultural and philosophical tradition which it is fulfilling and embracing. Party leaders like Liu know that arguing about the inevitability of historical materialism and Marxist dialectics has nothing like the emotional appeal of nationalism, and the construction of a great, powerful state. This is why some have argued that China's current ideological position is nothing more than nationalism dressed up in Marxist sounding garb, as was mentioned at the start of this essay. Things are more complicated than that. But the Party is certainly currently very keen to avail itself of the resources China's history offers.

How can one describe this hybrid system, and the parameters it supplies? In the 1980s, the framework was 'fragmented authoritarian' as it was articulated by foreign scholars like Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg. In the last decade, descriptions have ranged from 'consultative Leninism' to 'resilient and adaptive authoritarian.'¹⁸ Liu's statement shows that within the upper levels of the Party currently, there is no recognition of 'authoritarianism', or 'fragmentation', and no space for the idea of being Leninist, even though there is recognition of being consultative.

¹⁸ See Kenneth Lieberthal, *Bureaucracy, Politics and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, Introduction, 'The Fragmented Authoritarian Model and its Limitations', pp 1-31; Steve Tsang, "Consultative Leninism: China's New Political Framework", in *Journal of Contemporary China*, volume 18, Issue 62, 2009, pp 865-880; David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009

If You Talk about Us, Talk About Us the Way We Want

In foreign policy, China has adhered since 1955 to the rhetorical position of 'non-interference in the affairs of others.' In the ideological sphere, it occupies the same position. In the Maoist period, China did try to promote sinicized Marxism. But since 1978, it has been adamant that it is not in the business of changing the minds of people in the outside world about their choice of governance system and the philosophy underlining it. What it is most keen to do is to ensure that it defends its own system, and prevents interference in that.

This has extended to the way that the CPC relates to foreign discourses and conceptualisations of itself and its underpinning ideology. It stands by the principle that it accepts diversity, does not comment or involve itself in the choice by others of how they are governed and what they believe, and therefore does not want others to do commentary or analysis of them that is displeasing or within the wrong framework. Those who accept its ideological position sympathetically, such as writers like Martin Jacques whose book on the Party State's bright future garnered great praise in Beijing after it was published in 2008, have been embraced by the Party.¹⁹ Those that challenge it, or try to adopt what are seen as hostile, external principles of analysis are given a less easy time.

There is some tactical logic in this. While the CPC is highly unlikely to change non-Chinese attitudes towards their own governments and systems or thought systems, it can at least do something to control what ways people might understand and see it. This clash of perceptions however has led to some disharmonious outcomes. Attempts by the CPC to dictate how it must be understood, along the lines outlined above by Liu, have had mixed outcomes.

Eric X Li has been a spokesperson for the CPC's attempts to control more of the external agenda about itself, what it is, how it operates, and how it can best be understood. As a Chinese born American, he is able to operate well in two languages, and has been actively presenting to the outside world what is, to all intents and purposes, the Party's desired image of itself and its belief system. In an article published at the same time as Liu Yunshan's speech referred to above, Li talked of the 'emerging trends in Chinese Studies and the Role of the Party.' Separating study of the Party in the last six decades into two broad phases, he names first the history school. This, he states, 'seeks to study modern China in an historical context and thereby better understand the nation's trajectory. Their methods are deeply cultural.' This meets with his approval as it has made 'significant contributions to the world's repertoire of knowledge.'²⁰

The second group, however, is accused of being ideologically hostile to the Party. These appeared after the 1989 uprising in Beijing. 'Historic determinism,' Li states, 'framed their approach and the entire school was defined by the ideological dichotomy between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. The

¹⁹ Martin Jacques, 'When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order', 2nd Edition, Penguin, London, 2012

²⁰ Eric X Li, 'Emerging Trends in Chinese Studies and the Role of the Party',
http://m.china.com.cn/wm/doc_1_1_22164.html, accessed 10th November 2015

aim of their studies carried an overtly political and ideological agenda - to prove the Chinese political system is on an inevitable course towards eventual collapse.' This school, he concludes, 'have largely been discredited by facts.' Interestingly, he does not cite any particular examples of representatives of this particular group.

Most strikingly, Li sees a huge role for the Party in framing the area of Chinese studies for those outside the country. 'As such, the contemporary CCP, the party, as China's central governing institution, is in a position to exercise significant influence over the future landscape and conditions of Chinese studies and thereby China's image in the eyes of the world.' This makes clear that foreign analysis, specialists and researchers on China are now considered as a key target to potentially influence and work with. For them, the main thing is to be 'empirical', jettison ideological constraints from outside, and to be 'objective' – objectivity, however, in the service of a very clear message – to appreciate that 'Chinese phenomenon is perhaps the most significant experiment in political governance taking place in the world today', and that 'the party has led the most significant improvements in standard of living for the largest number of people in the shortest period of time in human history. The party's model of governance is deep and rich and unique.' In essence, an invitation for people in one ideological community to step across and accept the terms and parameters of another.

The Role of Ideology for the Future of the CPC

It is true that as of 2015, the Party could claim that its attitude toward ideology had proved itself. China was the world's second largest economy, and had managed to produce what Pantsov and Levine in their biography of Deng Xiaoping called a 'viable' system, where 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' worked. Attempts to make the Party's message about what it believed abroad became more systematic, as did its core offer to Party members within China.

Even so, this hybrid, diverse system carried within it many inconsistencies and tensions. There has been recognition in recent years about the disconnect between the party faithful, the general public and the political elites, which seem to speak different languages. As China moves into an era in which growth slows and the easy returns of fast development fade, there are real questions about how the CPC continues to maintain the faith and support of people. Nationalism seems a natural area to look at, with the incumbent problems of how this is perceived in the outside world and the problems it creates there.

The CPC stress on pragmatism too raises some interesting questions. Does this mean that in the end there are no red lines, and that what is dogmatically asserted today as being unacceptable can, when conditions change, rapidly become acceptable? In 2015, the CPC is asserting that only a one Party system will work for Chinese conditions. But perhaps one day, there will be powerful reasons to embrace a more diverse party structure, with the Party itself splitting between a left and right wing. Pragmatism implies that the Party in the end will do whatever it needs to maintain some position in power, and there is nothing fundamentally wrong with it existing in a context where other parties compete with it – as long as it always wins!

It is likely that we will continue to see surprises and innovations in the ideological position of the CPC into the future, just as we have in the past. Xi Jinping has characterized the Party as more akin to a

epistemic community, the repository of knowledge and expertise that China has gained over six decades as it has been governed by Communism. The question is how large the commitment to the fundamental tenets of One Party rule are and how they will deal with the transition to a much more complex, less regulated and more bourgeois society. Elsewhere in the world, this has always proved a dangerous moment. Will the Communist Party prove ultimately that it is as exceptional as its ideology asserts – or in the end succumb to the historic forces of inevitable development that it once, in a simpler age, said it believed. We will just have to wait and see.